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## JOURNAL CONTENT

SEARCH

SEARCH SCOPE

 All

 Search

BROWSE

[BY ISSUE](#)[BY AUTHOR](#)[BY TITLE](#)

## CURRENT ISSUE

ATOM	1.0
RSS	2.0
RSS	1.0

## USER

USERNAME PASSWORD ☐ REMEMBER ME

## INFORMATION

[FOR READERS](#)[FOR AUTHORS](#)[FOR LIBRARIANS](#)

## FONT SIZE

## JOURNAL HELP

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[Home](#) > [Vol 22, No 3 \(2019\)](#) > [Nielsen](#)

## Rethinking Tasmania's Regionality from an Antarctic Perspective: Flipping the Map

[Hanne E.F. Nielsen, Chloe Lucas, Elizabeth Leane](#)

## Introduction

Tasmania hangs from the map of Australia like a drop in freefall from the substance of the mainland. Often the whole state is mislaid from Australian maps and logos (Reddit). Tasmania has, at least since federation, been considered peripheral—a region seen as isolated, a 'problem' economically, politically, and culturally. However, Tasmania not only cleaves to the 'north island' of Australia but is also subject to the gravitational pull of an even greater land mass—Antarctica. In this article, we upturn the political conventions of map-making that place both Antarctica and Tasmania in obscure positions at the base of the globe. We show how a changing global climate re-frames Antarctica and the Southern Ocean as key drivers of worldwide environmental shifts. The liquid and solid water between Tasmania and Antarctica is revealed not as a homogenous barrier, but as a dynamic and relational medium linking the Tasmanian archipelago with Antarctica. When Antarctica becomes the focus, the script is flipped: Tasmania is no longer on the edge, but core to a network of gateways into the southern land. The state's capital of Hobart can from this perspective be understood as an "Antarctic city", central to the geopolitics, economy, and culture of the frozen continent (Salazar et al.). Viewed from the south, we argue, Tasmania is not a problem, but an opportunity for a form of ecological, cultural, economic, and political sustainability that opens up the southern continent to science, discovery, and imagination.

## A Centre at the End of the Earth? Tasmania as Paradox

The islands of Tasmania owe their existence to climate change: a period of warming at the end of the last ice age melted the vast sheets of ice covering the polar regions, causing sea levels to rise by more than one hundred metres (Tasmanian Climate Change Office 8). Eleven thousand years ago, Aboriginal people would have witnessed the rise of what is now called Bass Strait, turning what had been a peninsula into an archipelago, with the large island of Tasmania at its heart. The heterogeneous practices and narratives of Tasmanian regional identity have been shaped by the geography of these islands, and their connection to the Southern Ocean and Antarctica. Regions, understood as "centres of collective consciousness and sociospatial identities" (Paasi 241) are constantly reproduced and reimagined through place-based social practices and communications over time. As we will show, diverse and contradictory narratives of Tasmanian regionality often co-exist, interacting in complex and sometimes complementary ways. Ecocritical literary scholar C.A. Cranston considers duality to be embedded in the textual construction of Tasmania, writing "it was hell, it was heaven, it was penal, it was paradise" (29). Tasmania is multiply polarised: it is both isolated and connected; close and far away; rich in resources and poor in capital; the socially conservative birthplace of radical green politics (Hay 60). The weather, as if sensing the fine balance of these paradoxes, blows hot and cold at a moment's notice.

Tasmania has wielded extraordinary political influence at times in its history—notably during the settlement of Melbourne in 1835 (Boyce), and during protests against damming the Franklin River in the early 1980s (Mercer). However, twentieth-century historical and political narratives of Tasmania portray the Bass Strait as a barrier, isolating Tasmanians from the mainland (Harwood 61). Sir Bede Callaghan, who headed one of a long line of federal government inquiries into "the Tasmanian problem" (Harwood 106), was clear that Tasmania was a victim of its own geography:

the major disability facing the people of Tasmania (although some residents may consider it an advantage) is that Tasmania is an island. Separation from the mainland adversely affects the economy of the State and the general welfare of the people in many ways. (Callaghan 3)

This perspective may stem from the fact that Tasmania has maintained the lowest Gross Domestic Product per capita of all states since federation (Bureau of Infrastructure Transport and Regional Economics 9). Socially, economically, and culturally, Tasmania consistently ranks among the worst regions of Australia. Statistical comparisons with other parts of Australia reveal the population's high unemployment, low wages, poor educational outcomes, and bad health (West 31). The state's remoteness and isolation from the mainland states and its reliance on federal income have contributed to the whole of Tasmania, including Hobart, being classified as 'regional' by the Australian government, in an attempt to promote immigration and economic growth (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development 1). Tasmania is indeed both regional and remote. However, in this article we argue that, while regionality may be cast as a disadvantage, the island's remote location is also an asset, particularly when viewed from a far southern perspective (Image 1).

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Image 1: Antarctica (Orthographic Projection). Image Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#). Modified Shading of Tasmania and Addition of Captions by H. Nielsen.

### Connecting Oceans/Collapsing Distance

Tasmania and Antarctica have been closely linked in the past—the future archipelago formed a land bridge between Antarctica and northern land masses until the opening of the Tasman Seaway some 32 million years ago (Barker et al.). The far south was tangible to the Indigenous people of the island in the weather blowing in from the Southern Ocean, while the southern lights, or “nuyina”, formed a visible connection (Australia's new icebreaker vessel is named RSV Nuyina in recognition of these links). In the contemporary Australian imagination, Tasmania tends to be defined by its marine boundaries, the sea around the islands represented as flat, empty space against which to highlight the topography of its landscape and the isolation of its position (Davies et al.). A more relational geographic perspective illuminates the “power of cross-currents and connections” (Stratford et al. 273) across these seascapes. The sea country of Tasmania is multiple and heterogeneous: the rough, shallow waters of the island-scattered Bass Strait flow into the Tasman Sea, where the continental shelf descends toward an abyssal plain studded with volcanic seamounts. To the south, the Southern Ocean provides nutrient-rich upwellings that attract fish and cetacean populations. Tasmania's coast is a dynamic, liminal space, moving and changing in response to the global currents that are driven by the shifting, calving and melting ice shelves and sheets in Antarctica.

Oceans have long been a medium of connection between Tasmania and Antarctica. In the early colonial period, when the seas were the major thoroughfares of the world and inland travel was treacherous and slow, Tasmania's connection with the Southern Ocean made it a valuable hub for exploration and exploitation of the south. Between 1642 and 1900, early European explorers were followed by British penal colonists, convicts, sealers, and whalers (Kriwoken and Williamson 93). Tasmania was well known to polar explorers, with expeditions led by Jules Dumont d'Urville, James Clark Ross, Roald Amundsen, and Douglas Mawson all transiting through the port of Hobart. Now that the city is no longer a whaling hub, growing populations of cetaceans continue to migrate past the islands on their annual journeys from the tropics, across the Sub-Antarctic Front and Antarctic circumpolar current, and into the south polar region, while southern species such as leopard seals are occasionally seen around Tasmania (Tasmania Parks and Wildlife). Although the water surrounding Tasmania and Antarctica is at times homogenised as a ‘barrier’, rendering these places isolated, the bodies of water that surround both are in fact permeable, and regularly crossed by both humans and marine species. The waters are diverse in their physical characteristics, underlying topography, sea life, and relationships, and serve to connect many different ocean regions, ecosystems, and weather patterns.

### Views from the Far South

When considered in terms of its relative proximity to Antarctic, rather than its distance from Australia's political and economic centres, Tasmania's identity undergoes a significant shift. A sign at Cockle Creek, in the state's far south, reminds visitors that they are closer to Antarctica than to Cairns, invoking a discourse of connectedness that collapses the standard ten-day ship voyage to Australia's closest Antarctic station into a unit comparable with the routinely scheduled 5.5 hour flight to North Queensland. Hobart is the logistical hub for the Australian Antarctic Division and the French Institut Polaire Français (IPEV), and has hosted Antarctic vessels belonging to the USA, South Korea, and Japan in recent years. From a far southern perspective, Hobart is not a regional Australian capital but a global polar hub. This alters the city's geographic imaginary not only in a latitudinal sense—from “top down” to “bottom up”—but also a longitudinal one. Via its southward connection to Antarctica, Hobart is also connected east and west to four other recognized gateways: Cape Town in South Africa, Christchurch in New Zealand; Punta Arenas in Chile; and Ushuaia in Argentina (Image 2). The latter cities are considered small by international standards, but play an outsized role in relation to Antarctica.



Image 2: H. Nielsen with a Sign Announcing Distances between Antarctic 'Gateway' Cities and Antarctica, Ushuaia, Argentina, 2018. Image Credit: Nicki D'Souza.

These five cities form what might be called—to adapt geographer Klaus Dodds' term—a 'Southern Rim' around the South Polar region (Dodds *Geopolitics*). They exist in ambiguous relationship to each other. Although the five cities signed a Statement of Intent in 2009 committing them to collaboration, they continue to compete vigorously for northern hemisphere traffic and the brand identity of the most prominent global gateway. A state government brochure spruiks Hobart, for example, as the "perfect Antarctic Gateway" emphasising its uniqueness and "natural advantages" in this regard (Tasmanian Government, 2016). In practice, the cities are automatically differentiated by their geographic position with respect to Antarctica. Although the 'ice continent' is often conceived as one entity, it too has regions, in both scientific and geographical senses (Terauds and Lee; Antonello). Hobart provides access to parts of East Antarctica, where the Australian, French, Japanese, and Chinese programs (among others) have bases; Cape Town is a useful access point for Europeans going to Dronning Maud Land; Christchurch is closest to the Ross Sea region, site of the largest US base; and Punta Arenas and Ushuaia neighbour the Antarctic Peninsula, home to numerous bases as well as a thriving tourist industry.

The Antarctic sector is important to the Tasmanian economy, contributing \$186 million (AUD) in 2017/18 (Wells; Gutwein; Tasmanian Polar Network). Unsurprisingly, Tasmania's gateway brand has been actively promoted, with the 2016 *Australian Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan* foregrounding the need to "Build Tasmania's status as the premier East Antarctic Gateway for science and operations" and the state government releasing a "Tasmanian Antarctic Gateway Strategy" in 2017. The Chinese Antarctic program has been a particular focus: a Memorandum of Understanding focussed on Australia and China's Antarctic relations includes a "commitment to utilise Australia, including Tasmania, as an Antarctic 'gateway'." (Australian Antarctic Division). These efforts towards a closer relationship with China have more recently come under attack as part of a questioning of China's interests in the region (without, it should be noted, a concomitant questioning of Australia's own considerable interests) (Baker 9). In these exchanges, a global power and a state of Australia generally classed as regional and peripheral are brought into direct contact via the even more remote Antarctic region. This connection was particularly visible when Chinese President Xi Jinping travelled to Hobart in 2014, in a visit described as both "strategic" and "incongruous" (Burden). There can be differences in how this relationship is narrated to domestic and international audiences, with issues of sovereignty and international cooperation variously foregrounded, laying the ground for what Dodds terms "awkward Antarctic nationalism" (1).

## Territory and Connections

The awkwardness comes to a head in Tasmania, where domestic and international views of connections with the far south collide. Australia claims sovereignty over almost 6 million km<sup>2</sup> of the Antarctic continent—a claim that in area is "roughly the size of mainland Australia minus Queensland" (Bergin). This geopolitical context elevates the importance of a regional part of Australia: the claims to Antarctic territory (which are recognised only by four other claimant nations) are performed not only in Antarctic localities, where they are made visible "with paraphernalia such as maps, flags, and plaques" (Salazar 55), but also in Tasmania, particularly in Hobart and surrounds. A replica of Mawson's Huts in central Hobart makes Australia's historic territorial interests in Antarctica visible in an urban setting, foregrounding the figure of Douglas Mawson, the well-known Australian scientist and explorer who led the expeditions that proclaimed Australia's sovereignty in the region of the continent roughly to its south (Leane et al.). Tasmania is caught in a balancing act, as it fosters international Antarctic connections (such as hosting vessels from other national programs), while also playing a key role in administering what is domestically referred to as the Australian Antarctic Territory. The rhetoric of protection can offer common ground: island studies scholar Godfrey Baldacchino notes that as island narratives have moved "away from the perspective of the 'explorer-discoverer-colonist'" they have been replaced by "the perspective of the 'custodian-steward-environmentalist'" (49), but reminds readers that a colonising disposition still lurks beneath the surface. It must be remembered that terms such as "stewardship" and "leadership" can undertake sovereignty labour (Dodds "Awkward"), and that Tasmania's Antarctic connections can be mobilised for a range of purposes. When Environment Minister Greg Hunt proclaimed at a press conference that: "Hobart is the gateway to the Antarctic for the future" (26 Apr. 2016), the remark had meaning within



discourses of both sovereignty and economics. Tasmania's capital was leveraged as a way to position Australia as a leader in the Antarctic arena.

### From 'Gateway' to 'Antarctic City'

While discussion of Antarctic 'Gateway' Cities often focuses on the economic and logistical benefit of their Antarctic connections, Hobart's "gateway" identity, like those of its counterparts, stretches well beyond this, encompassing geological, climatic, historical, political, cultural and scientific links. Even the southerly wind, according to cartoonist Jon Kudelka, "has penguins in it" (Image 3). Hobart residents feel a high level of connection to Antarctica. In 2018, a survey of 300 randomly selected residents of Greater Hobart was conducted under the umbrella of the "Antarctic Cities" Australian Research Council Linkage Project led by Assoc. Prof. Juan Francisco Salazar (and involving all three present authors). Fourteen percent of respondents reported having been involved in an economic activity related to Antarctica, and 36% had attended a cultural event about Antarctica. Connections between the southern continent and Hobart were recognised as important: 71.9% agreed that "people in my city can influence the cultural meanings that shape our relationship to Antarctica", while 90% agreed or strongly agreed that Hobart should play a significant role as a custodian of Antarctica's future, and 88.4% agreed or strongly agreed that: "How we treat Antarctica is a test of our approach to ecological sustainability."

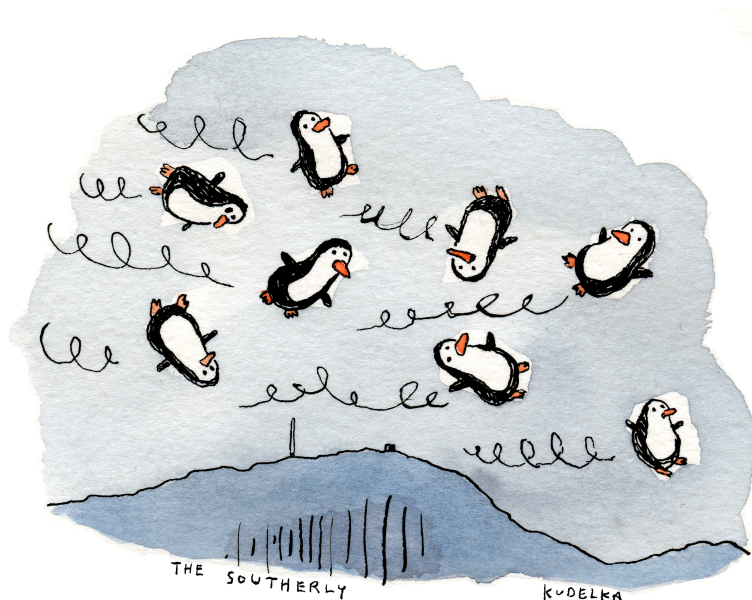


Image 3: "The Southerly" Demonstrates How Weather Connects Hobart and Antarctica. Image Credit: Jon Kudelka, Reproduced with Permission.

Hobart, like the other gateways, activates these connections in its conscious place-branding. The city is particularly strong as a centre of Antarctic research: signs at the cruise-ship terminal on the waterfront claim that "There are more Antarctic scientists based in Hobart [...] than at any other one place on earth, making Hobart a globally significant contributor to our understanding of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean." Researchers are based at the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS), the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD), with several working between institutions. Many Antarctic researchers located elsewhere in the world also have a connection with the place through affiliations and collaborations, leading journalist Jo Chandler to assert that "the breadth and depth of Hobart's knowledge of ice, water, and the life forms they nurture [...] is arguably unrivalled anywhere in the world" (86).

Hobart also plays a significant role in Antarctica's governance, as the site of the secretariats for the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) and the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP), and as host of the Antarctic Consultative Treaty Meetings on more than one occasion (1986, 2012). The cultural domain is active, with Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) featuring a permanent exhibit, "Islands to Ice", emphasising the ocean as connecting the two places; the Mawson's Huts Replica Museum aiming (among other things) to "highlight Hobart as the gateway to the Antarctic continent for the Asia Pacific region"; and a biennial Australian Antarctic Festival drawing over twenty thousand visitors, about a sixth of them from interstate or overseas (Hingley). Antarctic links are evident in the city's natural and built environment: the dolerite columns of Mt Wellington, the statue of the Tasmanian Antarctic explorer Louis Bernacchi on the waterfront, and the wharfs that regularly accommodate icebreakers such as the *Aurora Australis* and the *Astrolabe*. Antarctica is figured as a southern neighbour; as historian Tom Griffiths puts it, Tasmanians "grow up with Antarctica breathing down their necks" (5). As an Antarctic City, Hobart mediates access to Antarctica both physically and in the cultural imaginary.

Perhaps in recognition of the diverse ways in which a region or a city might be connected to Antarctica, researchers have recently been suggesting critical approaches to the 'gateway' label. C. Michael Hall points to a fuzziness in the way the term is applied, noting that it has drifted from its initial definition (drawn from economic geography) as denoting an access and supply point to a hinterland that produces a certain level of economic benefits. While Hall looks to keep the term robustly defined to avoid empty "local boosterism" (272–73), Gabriela Roldan aims to move the concept "beyond its function as an entry and exit door", arguing that, among other things, the local community should be actively engaged in the Antarctic region (57). Leane, examining the representation of Hobart as a gateway in historical travel texts, concurs that "ingress and egress" are insufficient descriptors of Tasmania's relationship with Antarctica, suggesting that at least discursively the island is positioned as "part of an Antarctic rim, itself sharing qualities of the polar region" (45). The ARC Linkage Project described above, supported by the Hobart City Council, the State Government and the University of Tasmania, as well as other national and international partners, aims to foster the idea of the Hobart and its counterparts as 'Antarctic cities' whose citizens act as custodians for the South Polar region, with a genuine concern for and investment in its future.

## Near and Far: Local Perspectives

A changing climate may once again herald a shift in the identity of the Tasmanian islands. Recognition of the central role of Antarctica in regulating the global climate has generated scientific and political re-evaluation of the region. Antarctica is not only the planet's largest heat sink but is the engine of global water currents and wind patterns that drive weather patterns and biodiversity across the world (Convey et al. 543). For example, Tas van Ommen's research into Antarctic glaciology shows the tangible connection between increased snowfall in coastal East Antarctica and patterns of drought southwest Western Australia (van Ommen and Morgan). Hobart has become a global centre of marine and Antarctic science, bringing investment and development to the city. As the global climate heats up, Tasmania—thanks to its low latitude and southerly weather patterns—is one of the few regions in Australia likely to remain temperate. This is already leading to migration from the mainland that is impacting house prices and rental availability (Johnston; Landers 1). The region's future is therefore closely entangled with its proximity to the far south. Salazar writes that "we cannot continue to think of Antarctica as the end of the Earth" (67). Shifting Antarctica into focus also brings Tasmania in from the margins. As an Antarctic city, Hobart assumes a privileged position on the global stage. This allows the city to present itself as central to international research efforts—in contrast to domestic views of the place as a small regional capital. The city inhabits dual identities; it is both on the periphery of Australian concerns and at the centre of Antarctic activity. Tasmania, then, is not in freefall, but rather at the forefront of a push to recognise Antarctica as entangled with its neighbours to the north.

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## Keywords

Antarctica; Australia; Connection; Geography; Hobart; Regional; Remote; Territory

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